

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

The last of the Christmas cards have probably arrived this week, although with the mail strike leading up to Christmas you may still get some in the coming days. The friendly greetings of Merry Christmas we heard in the stores and on the streets have come to an end. For a world that focuses on something other than the birth of Christ, Christmas is over. Oh, we may stop and think of people that we should still call and wish a merry Christmas, and we will kick ourselves for not sending out cards to certain people. But really the time for greetings is past. Now things will start to get back to normal.

Just as there are many who have put Christmas away for the year, there are others who wish that Christmas would last all year long. They enjoy the friendliness of the season. They enjoy opening the cards and letters filled with warm greetings. They enjoy the spirit of the season. As Christians we know that Christmas doesn't end, because what God gave us at Christmas is something that gives us life and hope each and every day. The joy and love of Christmas do last all year long because Christmas tells us that God is with us each and every day. But do we realize that it is never too late for us to share these Christmas greetings with others? I don't mean that we should now mail out all the cards we forgot to mail before. But we still can share with people the message of Christmas. That is what Anna did in our text today. She didn't know about Christmas as we understand it. She didn't know about holiday greetings and cards and things. But she did know who Jesus was when his parents brought Him to the temple. Our text tells us: ***“she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”*** That was her Christmas greeting to the people around her, to tell them what God had done for them in sending Jesus into our world. And with Anna, we can share that Christmas greeting to all people all year round.

The events of our text today take place forty days after the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph have moved out of the stable and likely are staying with a relative or friends for a little while. Jesus had been circumcised according to the law of Moses on the eighth day after His birth, but there is still one more legal requirement that must be performed. God had told Moses: ***“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”*** (Exodus 13:2, ESV) As the God-fearing people they were, Joseph and Mary carried out these requirements of the law. As we read in our gospel lesson today. ***“And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord.”*** (Luke 2:22–24, ESV) They went to the temple to offer the purification sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves which was necessary after birth. They also went to redeem their son, either through a sacrifice or the payment of five shekels, because every first born son was to be consecrated to the Lord as a reminder that God had spared the firstborn in the plague of Egypt.

In themselves there was nothing unique about these actions. They happened all the time. In fact, there were likely other families in the temple doing the very same thing. But Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus are singled out by two people—first by Simeon and then by Anna, the prophetess. Led by the Holy Spirit, these two saints find the holy family in the crowds, and immediately they recognize the Child for who He is—the promised Redeemer of Israel. The joy of this moment leads Simeon to praise God in song. Anna also gave thanks to God, and went on to tell others the good news that the Messiah had come.

We could ignore this text as just a minor, insignificant event in the life of Jesus. Yet we can hardly call this event insignificant. In the words of Simeon and Anna, we have an early confirmation of who Jesus is and the work that He will accomplish on behalf of the people of God. But today we want to focus on the response of Anna when she sees the Christ child. It is the same response we see in the shepherds of Bethlehem. The angel spoke to the shepherds of the Saviour, born for all and we are told: ***“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”*** (Luke 2:16–17, ESV) We see that response in Simeon who loudly sings the praises of God because of the baby. Anna, too, cannot keep this good news to herself. In her joy ***she began to give***

thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

New parents are anxious to tell others the good news about a birth. Grandparents feel the same excitement. But here it is a total stranger who is all excited about this one baby. It wasn't just the fact that a baby was born that was so exciting for Anna. What filled her heart with joy was the realization of who this baby was. The Holy Spirit opened her eyes so that, with one look at the Child, she knew who He is. This is the promised Messiah, the Saviour that God had promised. Simeon had called the Christ-child ***“a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*** (Luke 2:32, ESV) Isaiah spoke of Him as Immanuel, a name which means “God with us.” It is this wonderful revelation that leads Anna to share her joy with those around her. Her heart was filled with joyful Christmas greetings that had to be told. The people of Israel were longing for a rescuer, the one who would save them from the hand of their enemies. Anna saw that rescue; she saw the One who would deliver all people from the power of sin, death and hell. What else could she do but tell others, especially those who had longed for this day, that God had sent His promised Saviour. Sinful mankind now had hope—and that hope was made known in the Child of Mary, the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Anna’s Christmas message is one that can—and should—be told each and every day. She spoke of ***the redemption of Jerusalem***. The word that we translate as redemption also refers to a ransom. When we think of ransom, we think of someone who is taken hostage, who cannot be free unless a price that is demanded for their freedom is paid. In the same way, the idea of redemption is “to buy back”. Anna, Simeon and all who were looking for the redemption of Israel would understand that the redemption that is needed will cost much.

Why do we need redemption? Even devout, faithful Simeon and the pious, prayerful prophetess Anna need a Redeemer. It is sad that all around them were so many who had perverted ideas of God’s redemption. They saw their own good works as enough. They didn’t want to recognize their sin. Yet the day will come when Jesus will say to all people, including those misguided scribes and Pharisees: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”*** (John 8:34, ESV) Everyone who practices sin is a slave. That includes you and me. For all the kind words we may have been sharing in this Christmas season, how many harsh and wicked words have we spoken? We have given gifts of love to those around us, but have we also failed to show the love we should to those most in need? We are captives to sin and death. Like Paul we have to admit: ***“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*** (Romans 7:21–24, ESV)

Paul knew the same hope that Simeon had and of which Anna prophesied. That hope is found in the Christ, born to save all mankind. He is the redemption of Israel and the whole world. He is the One who pays the price for our ransom. The psalmist said: ***“Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice.”*** (Psalm 49:7–8, ESV) Throughout the Old Testament the people understood that the sacrifices of bulls and goats and sheep were done to offer ransom for their sins. Yet it does not suffice. It is never enough. That is why God comes from heaven to earth, to be one with us in Jesus Christ. He is the One who will give His holy, sinless life on the cross for the sins of you, me and the whole world. He is the One who will pay the price and set us free, redeeming us from sin, death and hell itself. He is the One who changes all the hopelessness of this world into the joy of life forever.

This is the One of whom Anna spoke to those in the temple. He is the One of whom we speak, as we share this joyous Christmas greeting with others throughout the year. All around us are people who do not know Jesus as their Saviour. Some of our own members have fallen away, and have forgotten the glorious gift that God gives at Christmas. On your street are people who do not know what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ. Within your circle of friends and acquaintances are many more who need to know that Jesus is the only hope for our world, that He alone is the way, the truth and the life. This is the great Christmas greeting we should share with the world!

It is never too late for us to give this kind of Christmas greeting to people and it such a simple thing to share. When people ask you how your Christmas was, why not tell them how God blessed your celebration, rather than just talking about the company that visited or the gifts you received. When people say we were lucky to have a white Christmas, tell them how fortunate we were that our God blessed us with that beautiful white covering that reminds us of the white covering that we have when Christ removes our sin. Every word that comes out of your mouth does not have to say something about Jesus, but don't be afraid to tell others of the miracle of love that God sends to us in His Son.

It is never too late for that kind of Christmas greeting. Oh, it is quite true that many people will not listen to your Christ-centred greetings, because they are stubborn and their hearts are dead in their sin. But don't be discouraged. Be like Anna. She continued to tell others of the wonderful things that God had done for mankind, because He had given His Son to save the world. And when people do hear this message and believe, then they too will know the life that Christ brings to all who believe in Him—the life of glory in heaven. Lord, fill our hearts with the message of Christmas that we may share it with the world each and every day. Amen.